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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study that examined the demand for tutoring within a context of heightened credential competition and a growing private-education sector consisting of private schools, charter schools, homeschoolers, and a burgeoning entrepreneurial education industry. The number of private-tutoring businesses is rapidly growing in Canada, even though the Canadian educational system lacks the characteristics that normally fuel the demand for such businesses. Which kinds of parents hire and desire private tutors, and how is the demand linked to other educational preferences? Using data from a national survey, the study found that parents who desire affordable tutoring do not differ greatly from other parents in their demographic or political ideology. However, tutoring parents are less satisfied with public education, are more involved in their children's schools, and are greatly more desiring of private schooling and other educational alternatives. The paper concludes that for many parents, private tutoring represents a school choice by default, and is an affordable educational option in lieu of the ability to pay for private schools. (Contains 16 references.) (Author)

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NALL Working Paper # 65

School Choice by Default?

Understanding the Growing Demand for Private Tutoring in Canada

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Le Réseau de recherche sur les nouvelles approches de l'éducation permanente

Abstract

This paper examines the demand for tutoring within a context of heightened credential competition, and a growing private education sector, consisting of private schools, charter schools, home schoolers, and a burgeoning entrepreneurial "education industry." The number of private tutoring businesses is rapidly growing in Canada, even though the Canadian educational system lacks the characteristics that normally fuel the demand for such businesses. Which kinds of parents hire and desire private tutors, and how is this demand linked to other educational preferences? Using data from a national survey, I find that parents who hire or desire affordable tutoring do not differ greatly from other parents in their demographics or political ideology. However, tutoring parents are less satisfied with public education, are more involved in their children's schooling, and greatly more desiring of private schooling and other educational alternatives. I conclude that for many parents, private tutoring represents a "school choice" by default, an affordable educational option in lieu of the ability to pay for private schools.

Introduction: Tutoring and The Growing Private Education Sector

Policy makers across the western world argue that today's economy, more than ever before, demands better-educated workers (Davies and Guppy, 1997). Whether or not skeptics (e.g. Livingstone, 1999; Labaree 1997) are correct to argue that such skill demands have been outpaced by a growing rising supply of educated workers, there is little doubt that credential competition has intensified in recent years (Labaree, 1997; Davies and Hammack, 2001, Livingstone, 1999, Brown, 2001). As more people attain credentials, the value of credentials accumulated earlier declines, triggering a demand for further education. This intensified competition has motivated parents to seek strategies that enhance their children's competitiveness.

For many, private education represents one such strategy. Private schools generally offer smaller classes. Being selective, they also tend to offer a more intense academic environment. However, since private school tuition is generally prohibitive, one may hypothesize that less affluent parents seek tutoring as a more affordable alternative. Whichever is the case, many parents may be seeking tutoring to give their children a leg-up in new economy.

Private education is expanding massively in a variety of forms across the western world, and Canada is no exception. This growth is particularly pronounced in Ontario, Canada's largest province. The proportion of Canadian students enrolled in private schools grew by 20% over the past decade, while the corresponding percentage in Ontario was 40%. Between 1991 and 2001, the number of private schools in the province rose by 44%. This growth is interesting in that most Canadian provinces fund Catholic and other religious schools. The steepest growth is occurring in a new sector of private schools that are neither elite nor religiously-based (Quirke, 2001).

Other types of private education are expanding as well. Tutoring, for instance, has recently undergone a dramatic transformation. Long a cottage industry of lone tutors, over the past decade franchises such as *Kumon, Score, Sylvan Learning Center,* and *Oxford Learning Centre* have opened thousands of sites throughout the continent, and continue to grow. The number of tutoring businesses grew 200%-500% in major Canadian cities during the 1990's (Davies, 2001). In addition, home schooling has witnessed a phenomenal growth over the past 20 years (Stevens, 2001). Further, the demand for charter schools in Canada continues to grow, despite considerable political opposition.

The Apparent Anomaly of Private Tutoring in The Canadian Context

Canada provides an unlikely setting for a burgeoning private tutoring sector for two reasons. First, Canada lacks a high-stakes testing culture. This is important because standardized entrance exams for post secondary schooling, such as the American SAT, are typically seen as the main forces that generate markets for tutoring (Bray, 1999). Second, Canada lacks an elaborate hierarchy of post secondary institutions (Davies and Hammack, 2001). Without an elite Ivy League or ancient universities, Canada lacks a

steep prestige hierarchy of undergraduate institutions, and thus has a very small national market for undergraduate credentials. This too is important, since large scale markets for credentials are also seen to fuel a demand for tutoring. In general, Canada lacks the conditions that are seen to focus educational competition in ways that spark a demand for tutoring.

Yet, despite lacking high stakes tests and a strong post secondary hierarchy, Canada has witnessed a rapid growth in private schooling and tutoring businesses. Why? I argue that the new demand reflects a more generalized demand for educational skills. Tutoring businesses are increasingly attracting younger clients (cite our own study), for whom post secondary education is increasingly distant, and for whom the immediate benefits of tutoring are far less demonstrable. The expansion of the tutoring market for younger children thus signals something different. I argue that whereas tutoring once was a response to a short-term need, the recent growth of the Canadian tutoring industry reflects a more diffuse culture of educational competition. A larger and more varied market for private education can potentially pose a distinct challenge to the goal of educational equity. The growing popularity of tutoring, for instance, can offer a new educational advantage for youth from more affluent backgrounds, who are more likely to have the mean to purchase those services.

The expanding array of choices within the private sector raises questions about the demand for private education. This paper follows two lines of questioning.

First, what kinds of parents desire various forms of private schooling? Traditionally, the demand for private schools as been seen to emanate from a wealthy elite, or from a religious sector, and Sociologists usually assume that educational choosers are well-resourced actors. However, as more educational alternatives emerge, the portrait of the parent who seeks private education needs to be broadened. A body of research is now emerging on the types of parents who seek different educational alternatives.

- for each: talk about American research, then about applying to Canada

Home Schooling: Stevens
- labour intensive

Private Schools:

Charter Schools / School Choice
American research on school choice shows that consumer choice in education is a complex process, more so than assumed in abstract market models (Wells and Crain, 1997). Many parents "choose not to choose" in American school choice programs (see also Witte). This school choice literature does not always offer a story of self-maximizing families who evaluate their options and long term goals.

Tutoring:

- tutoring is a relatively less costly choice, both in terms of time, opportunity cost, and expense – it is a supplement
- nothing on types of parents
- nothing on Canada
- Canadian context is interesting for a few reasons

Second, in what ways are preferences for different educational alternatives linked? Beyond investigating which parents desire private versus public education, it is also important to examine if parents who desire one form of private education also desire other forms. For instance, on the surface the demand for private schooling and the demand for private tutoring may appear to be two very different. Tutoring is usually sought as a supplement to public school, a way to boost student achievement by hiring a private service. Seeking tutoring on a private market does not necessarily entail a rejection or criticism of public schooling. Private schools, conversely, compete with and replace public schooling.

Yet, these forms of choice may be related. Tutoring could express the same impulse that underlies private schooling: a preference for an alternative to public school. That is, for some parents, tutoring could represent a "school choice by default," sought as a much more affordable substitute for expensive private schooling. In this line of thinking, private tutoring and private schooling are conceived to be different points on a continuum of choice, differentiated by their cost and expense. That is, the rising demand for tutoring could be part of a larger syndrome of educational privatization.

Also, the composition of publically-funded schools differs in Canada versus the U.S. Most provinces fund Catholic schools, for instance, while Canadian school boards generally offer far fewer niche choices within their public system, such as charter schools or magnet schools. Nevertheless, privatization is altering Canadian education, as there is now considerable growth at the high school level, and some provinces are allowing for the existence of degree-granting private colleges and universities.

In this paper, I explore two sets of empirical questions. First, who desires these alternatives? What kinds of parents desire and or hire private tutors and private schools? Do they differ in some systematic way from non-tutoring parents, in terms of demographics, educational desires, political ideology, and parenting styles? Second, is the parental desire for tutoring linked to criticisms of public schooling, and desires for private education? Is tutoring desired mainly a supplement to help students compete within public schooling, or does it represent something more, a "school choice by default", an expression of an unattainable private schooling?

a) What Kinds of Parents Choose?

All parents face these diffuse pressures of credential competition for their children. However, not all seek tutoring or any other private alternative. What differentiates how parents respond to these pressures? Various contributors suggest that parents who desire school choice represent a new breed of parent in a number of ways. In this section I extrapolate from the school choice literature to derive some testable hypotheses about what kinds of parents may hire and desire private tutors.

Demographics:

The literature on school choice and private schooling suggests that, with some exceptions, choice-seeking parents have above-average levels of education, income, and socioeconomic status. Further, the American literature sees choice as an instance of white flight, and can be used to predict that these parents will be more likely to be white, and to be Canadian born, non-immigrants. A second hypothesis is that the demand for private tutoring likely comes mainly from busy, 2-earner families that have less time to monitor homework, and thus seek parental-substitutes in the form of enriched after-school care. A lack of disposable time is said to fuel a demand for a series of personal service industries, like fast food, home entertainment, daycare, etc. The growth of private tutoring businesses is seen in this context. Thus, it is reasonable to hypothesize that tutoring-seeking parents are less able to help with their children's homework, or to volunteer at their schools.

Beliefs and Ideologies: Dissatisfaction, Choice, and Politics

Beyond demographics, parents who seek the private education sector are said to hold beliefs and ideologies that differ from other parents.

A very common idea is that the public's faith in public education is falling into a crisis. Politicians and educational critics in many countries, including Canada (for a review see Guppy and Davies, 1999) suggest that many parents are seeking various forms of private education precisely because they are unhappy with Canada's public schools. Further, and relatedly, some say that these parents are particularly receptive to new ideologies about education. Specifically, such parents are said to generally support various versions of school choice.

Beyond these educationally specific beliefs, many writing in the school choice literature (e.g. Carl, Cookson, etc) argue that these parents are motivated by loftier, less proximate beliefs. The rationale here is that tutoring parents may part of a larger ideological trend, one that supports more privatized and commercial organizations of education. Some believe that such parents are more likely to support New Right political parties. Further, these parents are said to also agree with various privatizing measures, such as supporting greater business involvement in schools, supporting the commercialization of education, and supporting user fees in education.

b) links between forms of choice

Addressing these research questions offers a number of contributions. First, tutoring is almost unstudied by sociologists of education. While there is a small international literature on "Shadow education" (e.g, Bray, 1999; Baker et al, 2001), it has not examined the types of parents who demand tutoring. Second, by conceiving of tutoring as a species of private educational choice, understanding the demand for tutoring may yield new light on the nature of private school choice, especially by examining links among various forms of choice. Third, for reasons stated above, Canada provides an interesting venue to study educational privatization, particularly tutoring, as it lacks many characteristics that are said to fuel the demand for tutoring. In the next section I outline the methods used to address the main empirical questions in this paper.

Methods:

Data:

The data come from a national survey conducted by the *Environics* polling firm in 1997. This survey asked a random sample of Canadian adults a series of questions about education, and Neil Guppy and myself added to that survey a few questions on tutoring and charter schools. The result is a snap-shot of Canadians who receive or desire tutoring for their children. Originally, 2001 Canadian adults were surveyed, but certain questions about education and tutoring were asked only to the 514 respondents with elementary and secondary school aged children (those without children were not asked education-related questions).

Variables and Measures:

The dependent variables in this study come from two items. First, respondents were asked: "Do any of your children currently receive additional private tutoring outside school hours or have any in the past?" Of 501 parents, 47 responded "currently", 42 responded "in the past," 419 responded "no," and there were 6 non-responses. Thus, 17% of parents had at sometime hired tutors for their children anytime, and 9% of parents were currently doing so.

Second, the pollsters excluded the 47 respondents who were currently hiring tutors, along with the 6 non-responders, and asked the remaining 461 parents the following question: "If you had the time and/or money now, would you hire private tutoring for your child or children to supplement what is taught at school?" Out of 461, 218 said yes; 228 said no, and there were 15 further non-responses. Thus, 47% of those surveyed (49%, if one excludes missing cases) claimed to desire tutoring. Adding the "yes currently" responders to the desirers (47 + 218=265) yields a rate of = 52% (265/508) of parents who currently get or desire tutoring. Thus, roughly half of all parents either hire and desire to hire tutors.

Independent variables were organized into the following blocks: demographic background, political ideology, satisfaction with public education, and desire for educational alternatives.

First, I added a series of measures to represent respondents' demographic background. Demographic variables include income, educational attainment, age, gender, community size, nativity, use of language at home, and ethnic identification.

Second, I constructed a series of variables to measure parents' political ideology. These variables include party preference, and whether or not respondants' supported greater business involvement in schools, more commercialization of schools, and whether or not they supported user fees for schools. Specifically, a scale was created of "business involvement", focusing on whether or not parents supported involvement of business groups in public schools in 5 areas (financial support, content, teaching, secondary school coops, and post secondary coops). I created a 5 item scale (reliability alpha = .80). Next, I created a scale to examine whether parents supported the "commercialization" of education, measured by whether they supported the use of corporate advertisements in three areas: school yards and halls, classrooms, and computer programs. I created a 3 item scale (reliability alpha = .89).

Third, I constructed some variables to measure parents' attitudes towards education. One variable measured whether or not the market for tutoring was fuelled largely by two-income families who lack the time to work with their children. Here, the hypothesis is whether tutoring is sought by busy parents as a form of after-school care. The survey asked questions about assisting with children's homework, and time volunteering at their school. Thus, I used to self-reported measures: whether they regularly help with their child's homework, and whether they regularly volunteer at their child's school. In addition, I examined educational attitudes in the form of satisfaction with public schooling. Parents were asked the degree to which they were dissatisfied with their provincial school, using a 5-point Likert scale. Also, they were asked a similar question about their satisfaction with their children's own school (respondents usually rate their child's own school more highly than they rate school systems; see Loveless, 1997; Lipset and Schneider, 1987). Further, I created a scale to tap into a more general indicator of dissatisfaction. I used questions about parents' degree of satisfaction with provincial report cards, teaching of writing/reading, teaching of math, and promotion of self-esteem, to create a 4 item scale (reliability alpha = .93). Further, I added a single item that didn't load well in factor analyses:
satisfaction with child's own education.

Fourth, I added a series of variables that examine parental desire for private educational alternatives in order to measure the degree to which parents support initiatives such as charter schools, user fees, a private education for one's child, and home schooling.

Statistical Analysis:

The statistical analyses in this paper proceeds in two stages. The first stage consists of a simple comparison of mean scores on the independent variables between the different groups of interest: those who desire tutoring, those who get tutoring, versus those who neither hire nor desire tutors. The second stage consists of a set of binary logistic regressions with 2 dependent variables: whether or not respondents hire tutors, and whether or not they desire tutors. The independent variables were entered in two blocks; first, demographic variables, following by a second block of attitudinal variables.

FINDINGS:

[[[getters are slightly more negative, but keep in mind level]]]

a) Bivariate Relationships: Who Gets and Desires Tutoring?

The first part of the analysis is to compare the means and proportions of between tutoring and non-tutoring parents on a host of independent variables.
Table 2 shows the following noteworthy associations. Beginning with demographic variables, hirers of tutors have higher average incomes and education levels than do non-hirers. However, those who desire tutors have lower average incomes and education levels than do non-desirers. Thus we have a simple situation wherein those who hire tutors have a higher than average SES; those who do not but desire tutors have a lower than average SES. It appears, therefore, that SES influences the *ability* to hire tutors, but not the *taste* or the desire to do so. Otherwise there are no statistically significant effects of parental demographics on tutoring choices. The overall message is that the demographics of parents who either hire or desire tutors are not appreciably different from other parents.

Next, we explore whether tutoring parents are busier than other parents. It is reasonable to hypothesize that some parents may seek tutoring as a form of after-school care, or as a labour-saving service. The survey asked questions about assisting with children's homework, and time volunteering at their school. However, contrary to the "busy parent" hypothesis, the results in Table 2 show that tutoring parents actually report significantly more time helping with homework and volunteering at school. Thus, it appears that tutoring parents may be more intensely involved in their children's schooling, as opposed to being busy with other activities, and using tutoring as a type of surrogate parenting service. It may well be that tutoring demands that parents spend more time monitoring their children's homework, and have higher levels of involvement.

Turning to ideological and attitudinal differences between groups of parents, the data in Table 2 do not suggest that tutoring parents also hold especially different ideological beliefs. The groups do not appear to have different party preferences, for instance, for either the New Democratic Party on the left side of the political spectrum, nor the Reform party (now known as the Canadian Alliance) on the right. Next we examined scales for

whether parents support the involvement of business groups in public schools in 5 areas (financial support, content, teaching, secondary school coops, and post secondary coops). It is noticeable that all groups of parents are fairly positive towards, and supportive of, this business involvement. At this rather high level of support, the differences between tutoring versus non-tutoring parents are not significant. Therefore, the data suggest that few parents oppose all types of business involvement in schools, and tutoring parents do not differ in this regard.

Another attitudinal measure concerns the commercialization of schools; specifically, whether parents support the existence of corporate advertisements in three areas: school yards and halls, classrooms, and computer programs. Here, in a sharp turnabout from the previous item, most Canadian parents are fairly negative, and opposed these forms of commercialization. Further, tutoring parents show a comparable level of disdain for commercialization as do other parents, with no statistically significant differences in level of support. Thus, it appears that Canadian parents tend to draw a boundary between business involvement and actual commercialization. That is, they see business involvement as a "good thing," something akin to other forms of community involvement in schools, and will support it as long as it not exploitative or nakedly self-interested. If it is seen to be the latter, then they oppose it. Tutoring parents aren't different in these attitudes; they too are positive about business involvement and negative about commercialization.

Next we turn to more proximate attitudes about education, in order to test whether the decision and/or desire to hire tutors is associated with dissatisfaction with public schools. I created a scale based on the Environics survey questions to parents about the degree to which they were satisfied with these aspects of public schools: provincial report cards, the teaching of writing and reading, the teaching of math, and the promotion of self-esteem. I also examine a single item: their satisfaction with their child's own education. The results show that hirers are significantly more dissatisfied with public schools than are non-hirers. However, for purposes of interpretation it is important here to keep in mind the level of dissatisfaction. Generally, the entire sample of Canadian parents were satisfied with their public schools. Tutoring parents were somewhat less satisfied than others, but generally showed a positive level of satisfaction with public schools.

Finally, the final series of comparisons in Table 2 examine the associations of hiring and / or desiring tutors, and parental support and desires for other private **educational alternatives, including** charter schools, home schooling, user fees, and private schools. The key issue is whether tutoring is linked to support or preferences for these other private arrangements. The results show that desiring private school (if financially possible) has by far largest association with tutoring.

– in fact, private seekers can be seen to be educational purists, as associating private schools and tutoring as intensified supplements; one can support these and oppose commercialization

Overall, the bivariate analyses suggest that tutoring parents do not differ from other parents in most areas, though some important patterns of difference do emerge. There is a lack of evidence that tutoring parents differ greatly demographically, or hold greater dissimilar political ideologies than do other parents. However, when examining attitudes that are more specific to education, it appears that hirers are somewhat more involved with their children's schooling, are somewhat less satisfied, but still satisfied overall. By far the most important effect is the desire for private schools.

Interpretation:
- lack of link to ideology: distinguish desire for private education from commercial education – more proximate beliefs
- note: importance of not over-drawing the portrait of tutoring parents – even if relatively dissatisfied, does not mean absolutely dissatisfied
- perhaps lesson here is that one does not have to be sorely dissatisfied to want a private alternative
- how to understand? They are educational conniossuers
- to help interpretation of these data, draw on qualitative interviews in Toronto: report that parents' kids attend some of best high schools in city
- part of their intensity, probably driven more by looking for advantage than dissatisfaction

Multivariate Analyses: Predicting who gets and desires tutoring

The second stage of analysis consists of binary logistic regressions. Here I examined two dichotomous dependent variables: whether or not parents hired tutors, and whether or not they desired tutors. These regressions proceeded by adding two blocks of independent variables, beginning with demographic variables, then adding political and educational attitudes. The findings, seen in Tables 3 and 4, show some differences in whether one is comparing hirers versus non-hirers, and desirers versus non-desirers.

In the first table, examining predictors of whether or not parents hire tutors, in the first block age has a significant independent effect, along with education. Older and more educated parents are thus more likely to get tutoring, controlling for other demographic variables. The age effect might represent the age of children, perhaps. That is, older parents will have older children on average, and perhaps older children are more likely to receive tutoring. In the full model, there is evidence of a suppressor effect, in that education becomes a stronger, statistically significant effect, once attitudinal variables are added to the equation. [[how to interpret??]]

Among attitudinal variables, surprisingly the only statistically significant effect is the desire private school. This effect, however, is quite large. The odds ratios show that parents who desire private school almost four times more likely to hire tutors, compared to parents who do not desire private schools, controlling for other variables.
- interpret: importance of other educational attitudes not being significant

Table 4 shows the logistic regression for whether or not parents desire tutoring. The first block of predictors shows a negative effect for both education and income, as well as for community size. Desirers have lower education and income levels than do non-desirers, and tend to hail from smaller communities (where tutoring is less likely to be widely available). In the full model, income remains negatively significant. Among attitudinal variables, again, the largest effect is for desiring private school: parents who express a desire for private schools are almost 3.5 times more likely to desire tutoring than are parents who do not share a desire for private schools. Otherwise, it is noteworthy that in the full model, satisfaction, commercialization, business involvement have non-significant direct and total effects.

- seekers more amenable to educational alternatives; user fees likely similar to tutoring expenses

Overall, tutoring parents appear to desire educational alternatives and supplements, but this desire is not further associated with a weightier ideological baggage. Further, there is not a large SES effect on tutoring, likely because tutoring is relatively inexpensive compared to other educational alternatives.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this study suggests that parents who desire and / or hire private tutors do not greatly differ demographically from other parents.
Further, their preference does not appear to be accompanied by a weightier ideological baggage. That is, these parents are not more likely to vote for right wing political parties, nor are they supportive of efforts to commercialize public education. Further, they do not appear to be "busy parents" who hire tutors as a form of day-care, or as a way contract-out homework help for their children. If anything, these parents are more involved in their children's education. Where these parents differ from others is in their attitudes to educational choices. They are more likely to show some relative, if not absolute, dissatisfaction with public education, and are far more desirous of private education.

Extrapolating from these findings, I interpret tutoring parents to be competitive and pragmatic, more likely to be an old-style academic purist than a new commercializer, who seek tutoring to give their children a competitive edge in school. Tutoring is likely sought as a convenient and more affordable alternative to private schooling. Tutoring for many parents can be likened to a "school choice by default" because it appears to represent a more affordable alternative to non-religious private schooling, particularly in the Canadian context, which has far fewer public schools of choice than does the United States, yet mostly funds Catholic and other religious schools. That is, for many parents, tutoring is not merely a supplement to give their offspring a competitive advantage in public schooling. rather, seems to be a school choice by default, an expression of a larger desire for an educational alternative.

- An important implication of these findings is that school choice should be conceived as a continuum. As the supply of different private educational initiatives grows, it is important to recognize that some, such as tutoring, represent supplements to regular public schooling, while others, such as private schools, are competitors. However, the demand for these initiatives may reflect a continuum of cost, expense, and intensity, rather than a supplement / competitive dichotomy. This idea is also supported by the fact that tutoring is growing in Canada, a context without the usual institutional conditions that give rise to tutoring. For this reason, I suggest that tutoring, and private education in general, is a response to a generalized culture of competition, one that is international in scope.

Choice-seeking parents appear to be more intense than other parents, but they express this intensity differently, according to the venue. Homeschoolers choose a very labor-intensive option. Private schoolers choose a very expensive option. Tutoring parents appear to choose a middle ground, expressing their intensity through a market transaction rather than through their own time and labor (as do homeschoolers).

In future research I plan to investigate the demand for tutoring in a more in-depth fashion. For instance, our interviews suggest that the tutoring market is becoming increasingly niche-driven and stratified. Tutoring businesses are offering a widening array of services that vary widely in cost and intensity. Thus, while on average tutoring parents may not be wealthier than others, such averages may conceal important degrees of stratification. Tutors differ greatly in their cost and time-commitment, and certain parents may be more likely to purchase the more costly services than others. Thus, I aim to breakdown the demand for tutoring to reveal different market niches, and different levels of tutoring, in terms of number of hours hired, frequency, expense, purpose (ie. remedial vs enriched), and types of tutoring (ie. lone-tutors, franchises, learning centres, specialists).

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